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MOLIÈRE'S *DON JUAN*

I.

Although Molière's company had brought back to Paris a few of the comic and tragic plays by the older dramatists in which it had won success in the provinces, and although it gladly welcomed new pieces by younger writers, its main dependence was ever on Molière's own comedies. This is made plain by La Grange's register in which the programme of every performance is set down. When the company went to one or another of the royal palaces to give a series of performances for the King and the court, plays by any other dramatists than Molière were very rarely included in the list. He was the stock-playwright for the Palais Royal, as Shakespeare had been the stock-playwright of the Globe. As author no less than as actor, Molière was the mainstay of the enterprise; and his comrades kept looking to him to keep them supplied with new plays to attract the Parisian playgoers.

It was a severe disappointment to him that *Tartuffe*, the most original and the most powerful comedy he had yet written, could not be performed in Paris; and to his associates, as well as to him, this deprivation was also a pecuniary damage. It left the theater without any novelty to proffer and the company had to do the best it could with plays of which the public might be beginning to weary. For a while Molière seems to have hoped that the royal interdict on *Tartuffe* might be lifted; and it was not until early in the next year that he made ready a new play to take the place of the forbidden comedy. His choice of

a subject for this new piece reveals his desire to meet the wishes of his comrades and to supply the theater with an alluring spectacle.

The legend of *Don Juan* had been set on the stage in Spain; and the Italian comedians had promptly borrowed the Spanish play. It had achieved immediate popularity wherever it was performed, partly in consequence of its spectacular effects, the coming to life of a marble statue, and the descent of the blasphemous hero into the flames of hell. The original Spanish drama may have been presented in Paris by one of the Spanish companies which came to France from time to time. An Italian alteration had been produced by the company which shared the Palais Royal with Molière and his comrades. Two different French adaptations had been performed in Paris, one of them at the Hotel de Bourgogne. Molière was justified in believing that if he should prepare a version in his turn, it was assured in advance of a hearty welcome from the spectacle-loving playgoers.

He no more shrank from the task of making over a popular play than Shakespeare had hesitated to handle anew the worn material of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. We may doubt whether a lyrical legend, evolved by Spanish mysticism and tricked out with sensational trappings, would ever have tempted Molière for its own sake; it was too foreign to his temperament to have allured him, if there had not been pressing need of a new play to serve as a stop-gap until *Tartuffe* might be performed again. Chappuzeau, the contemporary historian of the French theater, cites Molière as a rapid writer, who could prepare in a few days a play that was greatly followed; and Molière may have swiftly made ready the easy prose of his new version of the old story. Although the impulse to write *Don Juan* was external, he did not shirk the labor needed to make the play as interesting as might be; and he seized the occasion to carry on the attack on hypocrisy which he had begun in *Tartuffe*.

Don Juan was first acted at the Palais Royal in February, 1665; and it was performed fifteen times in the following five weeks before the theater closed. These performances were highly profitable; and there is no reason to doubt that the popu-

larity of the piece would have kept it in the repertory for several seasons. But its career was cut short after the fifteenth performance. It had aroused a bitterness of animosity almost equal to that evoked by *Tartuffe*. The malignant assault of a bigoted lawyer on *Don Juan* was almost as offensive as that made on *Tartuffe* by a bigoted priest. To this attack friends of Molière retorted; but the play was held to be dangerous by those who had been shocked at the boldness of *Tartuffe*. All this leads to the conviction that the author must have received a royal hint not to bring the play forward when the theater reopened. Possibly this suppression of *Don Juan* was made a condition for the ultimate approval of *Tartuffe*.

It is noteworthy that Molière, who was unceasing in his demands on the King for permission to perform the comedy which lay close to his heart and in which he had expressed himself abundantly, made no public protest against the suppression of this later adaptation from the Spanish-Italian, although this could not but cut into the profit of the theater. Probably he was satisfied that the King had made amends pecuniarily when the company was taken directly under the royal patronage with a comfortable annual subsidy. And possibly he was not greatly interested in *Don Juan*, looking down on it as merely a job of hack-work, done under pressure of necessity to please his fellow-actors. He may have felt that this adaptation of a Spanish story, not really congenial in its theme, was not representative of the kind of work he was at last anxious to produce. Very likely he would not have been indignant if he could have foreseen that only four years after his death, the younger Corneille should be employed to turn his alert and vivid prose into tame Alexandrines and at the same time to make the play harmless by smoothing away the traces of Molière's indignation with hypocrisy.

II.

Although Molière chose to call *Don Juan* a comedy, it is not comic in its theme, and the laughter it may arouse is evoked only by episodic incidents here and there. The original Spanish play was a high-flown, lyrical melodrama, full of reli-

gious fervor. The Italian adaptations had retained the central situations, while warping the story to fit the traditions of the comedy-of-masks; they attenuated the perfervid romanticism of the original, and they elaborated the low-comedy part and all those passages where they felt at liberty to be funny. He followed one or another of these Italian versions and he may not have been familiar with the Spanish piece. Although he simplified the tangled sequence of events, he could not but be subject to his original; and he was unable to give to the story the logical unity of *Tartuffe* and of the *Misanthrope*. The piece remains almost as loose-jointed as an English chronicle play, *Richard III*, for example, — to which, indeed, it has more than a superficial likeness. It is a string of detached episodes, exhibiting successive facets of Don Juan's character and leading up to the banquet with the statue and to the fiery engulfing of the wicked hero.

Although the construction is rather fragmentary and although the sole unity is in the development of the character of the hero, Molière was able to bring the Spanish-Italian story into a certain conformity with the contemporary customs of the French theater. He made no reference to the passage of time; and therefore the several intrigues of Don Juan may be supposed to have taken place all within the limits of twenty-four hours or a little longer. He changed the scenery only between the acts and he left these backgrounds rather indeterminate. He entrusted the impersonation of Don Juan to La Grange; and himself took the part of the hero's servant, Sganarelle.

The opening of the play is a skilful specimen of exposition, an artful preparation for all that was to come after. To one of the minor characters Sganarelle sets forth what manner of man his master really is, declaring that "a great lord who is a wicked man, is a terrible thing." And immediately thereafter Don Juan, with characteristic cynicism, sets forth his own theory of life, appalling in its selfishness. This immoral code is then shown in action when Don Juan repulses one of his victims, Elvire, whom he has seduced from a convent and whom he now casts from him without disguising his impertinent disregard for her feelings. In the second act we see him at work,

cajoling two peasant girls and making each of them believe that she is his choice, even though they both claim him at once. In the third act he rescues one of Elvire's brothers from an attack by robbers; and then finding himself in front of the tomb of the commander whom he had killed a few months earlier, he orders Sganarelle to invite the statue of the dead man to supper. The statue bows his head in acceptance of the invitation.

In the fourth act Don Juan humorously pacifies an insistent creditor and listens rudely to his father who predicts divine vengeance on his incessant wickedness. Elvire, who has now made her peace with heaven, appeals to him to repent while there is yet time. Finally the statue of the commander comes to supper and invites his host to sup with him the next night. And in the fifth and last act Don Juan gives another proof of his impenitence by turning hypocrite and by pretending to have seen the error of his ways. He even pleads his conversion, when a brother of Elvire insists on his marrying his victim or giving to her champion the satisfaction of a gentleman. Then a ghost appears and changes into Time with its scythe. At last the statue of the commander enters, whereupon lightning flashes and a flaming chasm opens and Don Juan is precipitated to hell. Sganarelle briefly points the moral and the play is over.

III.

From this outline of the story it is clear that *Don Juan* cannot be considered a well-knit play, when it is tried by any severe standard of dramaturgy. Its action is casual and inconsequent, with more than one incident which is quite unnecessary. Having undertaken to make over a play of proved popularity, Molière contented himself with adapting or transposing the Spanish-Italian story; he did not assimilate it and make it his own absolutely. Possibly he did not feel free to modify the piece too much, and possibly again his heart was not in his work, since its subject-matter was not really to his own liking. It was a theme romantic and fantastic; and with these characteristics Molière had little sympathy. His own relish was ever for the concrete realities of life. He liked to deal with the men and women he saw around him in his own country and in his

own time. His own taste would never have led him to make a play having for its hero a remote and legendary character.

Although this must be admitted frankly, and although *Don Juan* must be considered primarily as a piece of hack-work accomplished to meet special conditions in the theater, none the less does the play demand discussion, if not as one of Molière's masterpieces, at least as a striking product of his genius. Just as Shakespeare took over the earlier *Hamlet*, preserving its plot intact, and then elevated it by purging away its baser horrors and by filling it with his own ampler poetry and philosophy and psychology, so Molière took over *Don Juan*—a far less congenial subject for him than *Hamlet* had been for Shakespeare, who had a liking for the supernatural—and lifted this to a higher level by his transformation of Don Juan himself. The shallow character of the universal lover, mocking Heaven and going to Hell, disappears to be replaced by the terrifying portrait of a great lord who is a wicked man. It is in the projection of this sinister personality that Molière put forth his full strength; and it is because of his portrayal of the steely iniquity of Don Juan, because Don Juan himself is a figure of incarnate evil, to be set by the side of Iago, that this play ranks itself along side of *Tartuffe*. And we can now see that the subject which Molière chose because of its spectacular elements he so handled that these spectacular elements cease to be significant or even important.

In several of the plays written between the first appearance of *Tartuffe* before the King and its final production five years later in the Palais Royal, one can perceive the same impulse which had driven Molière to compose *Tartuffe* itself; and in some of them we can discover traces of his disgust at the interdiction of his great comedy. Perhaps he might never have written *Don Juan* if *Tartuffe* had not been prohibited; and probably this prohibition is partly responsible for the deeper traits of Don Juan himself.

Don Juan is the embodiment of primitive sexual instinct,—selfish, lawless, and corrupting. Advancing civilization has found it needful to control this instinct; and the insatiable seducer has come under the ban of morals and of religion which

certifies morality. And therefore Don Juan is moved in his turn to scout religion and to see only hypocrisy in any manifestation of morality. He has shifting caprices and perverted desires, but his ingrained selfishness keeps him cold to the sufferings of his victims,—perhaps it even leads him to find a voluptuous satisfaction in their writhings. His amorous egotism, joying in the dexterity of his devices, leads him to be proud of his inconstancy and to hold it as an element of his superiority over the rest of men.

It is this type of essential energy, however misguided and misplaced, that Molière set on the stage with deep understanding of its possibilities. The dramatist lent to his frightful yet fascinating hero the finer qualities which belong to the type; and his Don Juan is no mere butterfly wooer of maid, wife, and widow; he is gay and clever, quick-witted and sharp-tongued. Above all he is brave; this much at least must be counted to his credit, that he is devoid of fear. A type of essential energy could not be a coward; and Don Juan has a bravura bravery. He displays an unconquerable courage in the face of death and in the presence of damnation. He has a final impenitence in view of eternity which may lend to him for the moment a likeness to Milton's Satan.

We are made to see Don Juan not only as he appears before us, but also as he revealed himself to the servant who has witnessed his misdeeds and who knows his secrets. Molière found this humble companion of the hero in his Spanish-Italian original, wherein it was no more than a low-comedy part, a mere funmaker, who, like a hundred other clowns, expected to get his laughs at all hazards in order to relieve the dark complexion of the main story. This low-comedy part Molière transposed for his own acting; and he called it Sganarelle, although the character differs widely from any Sganarelle presented in the earlier plays in which they appear. He is no longer the obstinate creature whom we have already laughed at again and again. He is now a cowardly servant endowed with penetrating shrewdness. He has the hard-headed simplicity of Sancho Panza; and it is he who acts as chorus, and serves as the mouthpiece of the author. His duty it is, not only to enliven the action by

his blunders and by his jests, but also to comment on what takes place, and to suggest to the spectators the repugnance which they ought to feel for the externally charming hero, so handsome and so brave, so cruel and so callous. It is Sganarelle who brings out the moral again and again in the course of the action.

IV.

Rarely has the morality of a play been confided to a character to whom we more willingly listen, for all that he is timorous, mendacious, and servile. He is the embodiment of French commonsense, as Don Juan is the incarnate French wickedness. And all the other characters in the play are equally swift to reveal their birth in France, even though they take part in a Spanish story with its scene laid in Italy.

Molière took a Spanish legend peopled with characters fundamentally Spanish, and he made it French. He allowed the action of his play to take place in an alleged Sicily, but the persons of his piece are French, all of them, inherently French. Shakespeare had also laid the scene of a story in a hazy Sicily, but his Beatrice and his Benedick are as English as his Dogberry and Verges. Shakespeare and Molière, both of them, reproduced characters they knew at first hand, and made no vain effort after local color. Neither of them fatigued himself in an idle endeavor to step off his own shadow. Alien as the theme might be to his sympathy, Molière modified it to suit his own intention and then peopled the borrowed legend with characters like those he had observed himself in the capital and in the provinces.

He put into the mouths of the peasant-girls and of the country bumpkin who is in love with one of them, a provincial dialect such as he had picked up in the days of his strolling. And his knowledge of the peasant, male and female, went far deeper than mere dialect, for he was familiar also with their modes of thought, with their narrow-mindedness and their obstinacy. The creditor whom Don Juan wheedles is a worthy burgher of Paris, a contemporary of Molière's father. The outraged Elvire might have stalked straight out of one of Corneille's lofty tragedies, and so might her fiery and eloquent

brothers. Don Juan's father is a gentleman of the old school, austere and unbending, a survival from the rule of Louis XIII, such as Molière may often have met in his father's shop. Sganarelle, for all his kinship with Sancho Panza, is no Spaniard and no Italian; his is a French sagacity and a French simplicity.

And Don Juan has suffered a change in crossing the Pyrenees and the Alps. He is a very different figure in Molière's play from the rather vulgar hero-villain of the turbid and violent Spanish piece. Less affected and less artificially, lyric, he has become more truly poetic. Above all, he has gained in distinction; he is now a gentleman, in externals at least, in breeding and in courage, and in overbearing self-confidence. Molière had not to go far afield in search of a model. There was a host of young gallants at the court of Louis XIV who might have sat for the portrait,—well-born, graceful, and unscrupulous. The comic dramatist was no respecter of persons, no flatterer of rank. He might be the servant of the King, but he was not a blind admirer of the King's courtiers. In play after play he had made fun of these dangles about the person of the monarch, as in the *Facheux*; and now he held up to scorn where all the world might see, burgher as well as courtier, a figure more despicable and more dangerous, the great lord who was a wicked man. He was here aiming at a loftier mark than the *précieuses* and the pedants, the bigots and the hypocrites. It had taken courage to do what he had done before; and no other dramatist of that day had dared to follow in his footsteps. To do what he did in *Don Juan* revealed a deeper audacity; and and there is no need to wonder why the career of the play was cut short.

V.

The fundamental inspiration of the Spanish original was religious; its author was sincerely devout; he intended his drama to be edifying; and his ingenious piece had a close kinship with *Life is a Dream*, with the *Devotion to the Cross*, and with other examples of Calderon's power of combining mystic emotionalism with spectacular theatricality. This religious im-

pulse was no longer potent in the adaptations of the Italians, whose devotion had little spirituality and who preferred to develop all the comic possibilities of the plot. In the two French versions which preceded Molière's and which he laid under contribution as was his custom, the spectacular element was emphasized and the characters remained unreal and exaggerated. It was left for Molière to sharpen the outlines of these characters, to make them obey the logic of their own natures, to give them the reality which they had lacked until then.

Keeping as much as he must of the framework of the legend, Molière profoundly modified the figures involved in it by making them veracious, by bringing them back to our common humanity. In endowing them with vitality, he enlarged their significance and he made possible the later cosmopolitan travels of *Don Juan*. The Spanish quality of the play disappeared, or was at least greatly reduced; and the subject was made French, with the gravity which the French derived from the Latins and with the gaiety which descends to them from the Gauls. Thus enlarged, thus lifted up, the theme was capable of universality, and it was ready to wander from land to land and from art to art.

It is the *Don Juan* of Molière who is the immediate ancestor of the conscienceless fascinator of Byron and Merimée, of Mozart and Musset. It is to Molière that the perversely attractive figure of Don Juan owes its elevation, its largeness, its major meaning. It is in Molière's play that the real Don Juan, as we know him now in story, in song, and in picture, first emerges,—a freethinker and a libertine, an atheist who is also a hypocrite, a lordly seducer whose desire after women is physical, of course, but psychological also, and to almost an equal extent. It is in Molière's play that we first find the virtuoso in seduction, whose insatiable curiosity causes him to take keener pleasure in the delayed pursuit than in the ultimate possession, and who is therefore condemned to lose all interest in his conquest as soon as the final resistance is overcome. It is in Molière's play that we can first perceive the Don Juan who devotes his life to loving, who (simply because he loves every woman equally) loves no one of them with all the unforgettable appeal

of an overmastering passion, and who therefore has to die without ever suspecting what love may be.

It is only after Molière had rehandled the legend that the supernatural element — out of which the story had arisen originally — lost its importance and became indeed almost negligible. Thereafter what holds our attention and focusses our interest is not what happens to Don Juan, but what he is. He ceases to be a mere wooer at large, commonplace and unconvincing. He fixes himself in our memories as a human being, immeshed in the realities of life, far subtler than his Spanish-Italian forerunner, far more significant and far more sinister.

Molière may have composed *Don Juan* in haste to serve a temporary purpose, accepting a theme which he might never have chosen of his own free will, and his conduct of his plot may be careless and his construction straggling, but he here revealed a power of dealing with the deeper aspects of human nature, a power not displayed as profoundly in any other of his plays.

BRANDER MATTHEWS.

Columbia University.